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2012: Too much of a temptation for Christie?

By **John Fund**

New Jersey governor Chris Christie has joked that only his suicide would put an end to the demands that he run for president. His aides continue to shoot down rumors that he is mulling a last-minute parachute jump into the middle of the GOP field. Just a few weeks ago, he accepted the post of vice chairman of the Republican Governors Association, a prestigious position that he would have to abandon immediately if he were to enter the race.

But there are signs the governor may be privately reconsidering. Paul Gigot, editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, told *Fox News Sunday* that according to his sources Christie is “very carefully” rethinking his opposition to running for president. “There are enough people who have gone to him now and said, ‘Look, this field is weak, and none of them may be able to beat the president . . . Now is your moment . . .’” A top Republican donor to Christie told me he is convinced the man has already decided to run. A prominent New York political figure is equally certain he will enter the race.

But is it too late for a late entry into the GOP sweepstakes? Gov. Mitch Daniels of Indiana says “someone else could still enter and have a competitive chance.” He told the *New York Times* he’s “tried to recruit three or four people,” because, like many Republicans, he isn’t satisfied with the current Republican field. I have no doubt Governor Christie was the recipient of one of Mitch Daniels’s calls.

With the exception of Sarah Palin or some mysterious billionaire, Governor Christie is probably the only person who could still enter at this late date. His “rock star” persona built around his blunt talking style would immediately place him in the top tier of candidates, along with Mitt Romney and Rick Perry. There is no doubt that money would not be a problem. Just as Governor Perry has a network of Texas supporters ready to spend millions on his candidacy, Christie has been assured by many Northeastern donors that they could swiftly arrange a similar or even greater network of support. While Christie’s political team hasn’t won a race outside New Jersey, it is nonetheless made of battle-hardened veterans who know how to throw a punch.

But despite all that, I’m still not convinced Christie will ultimately enter the race. “I don’t think any of those donors who are convinced he’s running have sat down and fully gotten the views of Mary Pat, his wife,” a friend of Christie’s told me. Both she and her husband

are said to be very protective of their four children, who range in age from eight to 18, and want to give them as normal a childhood as possible — one reason the Christies continue to live in their home in suburban Mendham rather in Drumthwacket, the regal governor's mansion in Princeton. Family considerations matter when someone is deciding to run for president. Governor Daniels said he himself didn't run this time because his wife and four daughters didn't want him to. "There's one statement I know of that a father has no reply to: 'Daddy, please don't,'" he says.

Then there is local politics. New Jersey Republicans are in the middle of a bruising mid-term election campaign for the state legislature under a newly redistricted map. Polls show Republicans are tied or trailing in several key districts, and they are relying on Christie to help by attending fundraisers and making phone calls on their behalf. "It would be very awkward if Christie effectively left New Jersey while his party was trying to win seats so he could better implement his reform agenda," a New Jersey GOP legislator told me. "If he came back bruised and diminished from a failed presidential bid, it might impact his governorship and make him less likely to be able to run in a future year." Republican voters I've talked to don't want Christie to run for president because they think he needs more time to clean up their state. A hint of that attitude may be found in a Quinnipiac poll from June, which showed that a third of Republicans in New Jersey thought Christie would make a bad vice president if he were named to the GOP ticket next year.

A Quinnipiac poll in August also points out vulnerabilities Christie might have in a general election. While his approval rating narrowly tops his disapproval numbers, 47 to 46 percent, he hasn't convinced home-state voters he's ready to be president. When asked who is a better leader, President Obama or their own governor, New Jersey voters pick Obama over Christie by 49 to 44 percent. This is in spite of the fact that Obama's approval rating is below Christie's, at 44 percent favorable and 52 percent unfavorable.

Ambivalence to Christie's potential national ambitions is rooted in a canyon-wide gender gap. In the Quinnipiac poll, men approve of the governor's performance by 58 to 36 percent, while women are almost a mirror image at 55 percent disapproval and 37 percent approval. What men see as refreshing candor in their governor, women often see as overly confrontational. Maurice Carroll, director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, says his June poll "found half of women in New Jersey think Christie is a bully."

This is not to say that Christie couldn't overcome that image. After all, he has shown he can be charming in addition to being shockingly candid. But just as Mitt Romney has to struggle against his image as a bloodless technocrat, and Rick Perry has to contend with those who believe he is a shoot-from-the-lip Texan who is careless with his rhetoric, Christie would have to deal with critics of his style.

But perhaps the biggest obstacle to a Christie candidacy is his repeated protestations that after less than two years as governor he simply isn't ready to be president — yet. Back in January he told Chris Wallace of Fox News that he was "not arrogant" enough to believe

he was prepared for the presidency. “You have to believe in your heart that you’re personally ready to be president and I’m not there,” he said. He has repeated that sentiment enough times, accompanied by warnings that Barack Obama shows what happens when a president is not experienced enough, that his opponents could splice together quite a juicy commercial with such sound bites.

Some Christie boosters are unfazed by his claims he is not yet ready to be president. “It would be a problem, but he could get past it,” says Ed Crane, the president of the Cato Institute in Washington.

I’m not so sure. Chris Christie has accomplished a lot as New Jersey governor, but if he were to suddenly announce his candidacy for president he would have to jump very quickly into an array of issues he has had to handle only tangentially as governor. He would have to develop a full-fledged foreign-policy platform, along with ways to deal with Republicans who would have trouble with his views on immigration and global warming, and what some people see as his nonchalance toward radical Islam.

The question may be not so much whether Chris Christie is ready to be president, as whether he is ready to launch a hell-bent, zero-to-60 presidential campaign with the withering national media scrutiny it would entail.

Bio: John Fund is a columnist and writer based in New York. He is the author of *Stealing Elections: How Voter Fraud Threatens Our Democracy* (Encounter). The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of the author.